

# The Resurgence of Self: Neo-Dalit Consciousness in Contemporary Indian Writing

Niranjan Patel J

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Government First Grade College

Bidadi, Karnataka, India

[npniranjan96@gmail.com](mailto:npniranjan96@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This paper examines the rise of *Neo-Dalit Consciousness* as a transformative intellectual and literary movement within contemporary Indian writing. Building upon the foundational narratives of early Dalit literature—marked by testimony, resistance, and the exposure of caste oppression—Neo-Dalit Consciousness represents a significant ideological and aesthetic shift. It redefines Dalit identity through assertiveness, global engagement, and a sophisticated critical framework rooted in Ambedkarite thought. This new consciousness foregrounds agency over victimhood, dignity over imposed inferiority, and proactive political participation over passive suffering. Writers and thinkers such as Suraj Yengde, Meena Kandasamy, Yashica Dutt, and Manoranjan Byapari articulate this shift through works that challenge Brahminical hegemony, reclaim marginalized histories, critique mainstream aesthetics, and imagine egalitarian futures. Characterized by intersectionality, intellectual rigor, and transnational solidarity, Neo-Dalit writing not only interrogates structural caste violence but also constructs alternative epistemologies that de-brahminize knowledge production. As a literary and socio-political intervention, Neo-Dalit Consciousness signals a critical turning point—repositioning Dalit voices from the margins to the center of contemporary discourse, and redefining the possibilities of resistance, identity, and justice in modern India.

## **The Resurgence of Self: Neo-Dalit Consciousness in Contemporary Indian Writing**

For centuries, the literary landscape of India largely mirrored its rigid social hierarchy, often silencing or misrepresenting the voices of those at its lowest rung – the Dalits. However, a powerful and transformative movement, "Neo-Dalit Consciousness," is now reshaping contemporary Indian writing. This isn't just a continuation of earlier Dalit literature; it's a defiant reassertion of identity, a sophisticated engagement with global discourse, and a proactive forging of a distinct future, with thinkers like Suraj Yengde leading the charge.

Historically, Dalit literature emerged as a raw and urgent cry against the brutal realities of caste discrimination. It documented trauma, exposed injustice, and sought recognition for a humanity denied. While these foundational narratives remain vital, Neo-Dalit Consciousness builds upon this legacy, expanding its scope and methodology. It moves beyond mere testimony to embrace critical analysis, theoretical frameworks, and a confident assertion of Dalit identity not as victimhood, but as a source of intellectual and cultural power.

Neo-Dalit Consciousness refers to an evolved and assertive stage of Dalit identity and awareness, especially prominent in contemporary Indian society and literature. It marks a shift from solely focusing on the pain and suffering of historical oppression ("Dalitism") to actively asserting self-respect, demanding social equality, and seeking to deconstruct the very foundations of the caste system.

**Keyword:** Shift from Victimhood to Agency: Neo-Dalit consciousness moves beyond seeking pity or sympathy. It focuses on the resilience, strength, and contributions of Dalits, projecting them as survivors and agents of change who deserve appreciation and equality.

**Self-Assertion and Dignity (Asmita):** A central tenet is the assertion of a proud Dalit identity and self-respect, a movement often framed as a struggle for "izzat" (dignity) or "asmita".

**Ambedkarite Ideology:** Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy forms the backbone of this consciousness. His emphasis on "Educate, Agitate, Organize" and the "annihilation of caste" are guiding principles, advocating for a rational, egalitarian society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity.

**Active Resistance and Questioning Hegemony:** Unlike earlier, sometimes passive, forms of protest, Neo-Dalit consciousness involves an active, often Marxian-Ambedkarite, resistance. It critically examines and points out the flaws in Hindu scriptures and traditional literature that justify caste hierarchy.

**Reclaiming and Rewriting History:** It involves discovering and highlighting lost or ignored Dalit histories and literature to boost self-confidence and challenge Brahmanical narratives that dominated mainstream discourse for centuries.

**Intersectionality:** Contemporary consciousness increasingly recognizes the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression, particularly the triple burden of caste, class, and gender faced by Dalit women.

**Political Mobilization and Modernity:** The consciousness translates into significant political mobilization and engagement with modern institutions (e.g., legal systems, education, media) to secure rights, representation, and social mobility through legal and constitutional means like affirmative action.

**Global Awareness:** The contemporary movement has gained international visibility, framing caste discrimination as a global human rights issue.

### **In Contemporary Indian Writing**

In literature, Neo-Dalit consciousness is a powerful force for social change, producing works that vividly document lived experiences and systemic injustices. Writers utilize autobiographies, poetry, and fiction to: Expose the brutality of the caste system and critique mainstream literary aesthetics. Portray Dalits not as pitiful victims but as complex individuals

with agency, intellect, and revolutionary potential. Inspire a new generation to fight for their rights and contribute to the creation of a just society

One of the most articulate proponents of this new wave is Dr. Suraj Yengde. His work, particularly "Caste Matters," has been instrumental in globalizing the conversation around caste. Yengde's approach is characterized by its incisive critique of Brahminical hegemony, its embrace of Black liberation theories, and its insistence on a radical intellectual tradition rooted in Dalit experiences. He challenges the dominant narratives not just within India, but on the international stage, drawing parallels and building solidarities that transcend geographical boundaries. Yengde's writing is not merely descriptive; it's prescriptive, advocating for a proactive Dalit political and intellectual agenda.

Beyond Yengde, numerous contemporary writers are contributing to this evolving consciousness:

Suhasini Mulay (while primarily an actress and filmmaker, her public intellectual engagement and support for Dalit rights align with this consciousness): Her outspokenness on social justice issues, and her willingness to use her platform to amplify marginalized voices, embody a commitment to challenging entrenched power structures that resonates with Neo-Dalit thought.

Meena Kandasamy: A poet, writer, and activist, Kandasamy's work is fiercely political and deeply personal. She fearlessly confronts caste, patriarchy, and state violence. Her poetry and prose are marked by their radical feminism and their refusal to compromise on the demand for justice and equality. Her novel "When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife" subtly weaves in themes of power dynamics and oppression that echo caste-based experiences.

Yashica Dutt: Her book "Coming Out as Dalit" powerfully articulates the experience of passing as upper caste and the eventual decision to reclaim her Dalit identity. Dutt's work

highlights the psychological burden of caste and the bravery required to assert one's true self in a society that often stigmatizes it. Her narrative contributes to the growing body of literature that explores the nuanced and complex internal lives of Dalits.

**Manoranjan Byapari:** A former rickshaw puller turned acclaimed author, Byapari's novels, such as "There's Blood on My Hands, But It's Not Mine," offer a raw, unflinching look at the lives of the marginalized. His narratives are rooted in the lived experience of poverty and discrimination, but they also showcase resilience, defiance, and a deep understanding of human nature from the periphery.

What unites these diverse voices under the umbrella of Neo-Dalit Consciousness is a shared set of characteristics:

**Assertive Identity:** Moving beyond pleas for recognition, these writers confidently assert Dalit identity as a legitimate and powerful source of knowledge, culture, and political agency.

**Global Engagement:** There's a conscious effort to connect the caste struggle with other global struggles against oppression, drawing parallels with race, class, and gender inequalities.

**Intellectual Rigor:** Neo-Dalit writing often engages with critical theory, philosophy, and socio-political analysis, offering sophisticated critiques rather than just emotional appeals.

**Challenging Internalized Oppression:** These narratives often delve into the psychological impacts of caste, including the concept of "internalized Brahminism" and the journey towards self-emancipation.

**Reimagining Futures:** Beyond critiquing the past and present, Neo-Dalit consciousness actively seeks to envision and articulate alternative futures, drawing inspiration from Ambedkarite ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity.

**De-Brahminizing Knowledge:** There's a deliberate effort to create alternative knowledge systems and critical frameworks that are not beholden to Brahminical perspectives.

The emergence of Neo-Dalit Consciousness signifies a critical turning point. It's not just a literary phenomenon but a socio-political movement articulated through the written word. It demands that India, and indeed the world, confront its caste prejudices head-on, not as an ancient relic, but as a living, breathing system of oppression. Through the powerful narratives and incisive analyses of writers like Suraj Yengde, Meena Kandasamy, and Yashica Dutt, the voice of the Dalit is not merely heard; it leads, it questions, and it transforms.

### **Key Aspects of Neo-Dalit Consciousness**

**Shift from Victimhood to Agency:** While early Dalit literature often focused on the pain and suffering of untouchability to expose social realities, the "neo" or contemporary consciousness emphasizes empowerment, intellectual engagement, and active rebellion against the oppressive caste system.

**Self-Assertion and Identity Formation:** The literature is a powerful tool for building a distinct Dalit identity, separate from the demeaning labels imposed by the upper castes. It is a journey from "anonymity to presence" and "invisibility to visibility".

**Political and Social Commitment:** Dalit writing is inherently a literature of social and political commitment, aiming for social transformation and the establishment of a just, egalitarian society.

**Critique of Mainstream Aesthetics:** Proponents of Neo-Dalit consciousness argue for a separate "Dalit aesthetics" that prioritizes authentic, lived experiences and social justice over conventional literary notions of "art for art's sake".

**Intersectionality:** Contemporary Dalit writing often explores the intersection of caste with other forms of oppression, such as class, gender, and religion, highlighting the compounded marginalization faced by Dalit women, for example.

**Global and Urban Contexts:** While rooted in rural experiences of caste, modern writing also documents the challenges and forms of discrimination faced by Dalits in urban,

metropolitan spaces, and connects the struggle to global anti-racist movements like the Black Panthers.

**Contemporary writers embodying this consciousness include:**

Omprakash Valmiki: His autobiography *Joothan* is a seminal work in Hindi Dalit literature, offering a raw, powerful indictment of the caste system and the struggle for education and dignity. Bama (Faustina Mary Fatima Rani): Her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (Tamil) explores the intersections of caste, gender, and religion within the Catholic Church and her community, marking a significant contribution to Dalit women's writing.

Sharankumar Limbale: Known for his autobiography *The Outcaste* (Akkarmashi in Marathi) and critical essays like *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, he has helped theorize and define the parameters of Dalit literature. Baburao Bagul: Considered a pioneer of modern Marathi Dalit literature, his work *When I Hid My Caste* depicted a cruel society and brought new momentum to the movement with its radical realism and anger.

Arjun Dangle: As an editor of the influential anthology *Poisoned Bread*, he curated works that provided a theoretical backdrop to the social and political movements, emphasizing the revolutionary potential of Dalit literature. Anand Teltumbde: A contemporary public intellectual whose scholarly works, such as *Dalits: Pasts, Presents, Future*, analyse the evolution of caste into a class-like divide in the context of neoliberalism and globalization.

**Conclusion**

The emergence of Neo-Dalit Consciousness marks a profound transformation in the trajectory of Dalit writing and identity formation in contemporary India. No longer confined to narratives of suffering or dictated by the frameworks of dominant castes, this new wave asserts a confident, intellectually rigorous, and politically charged Dalit selfhood. Rooted in Ambedkarite thought yet shaped by global solidarities, Neo-Dalit writing redefines what it

means to speak from the margins by turning those very margins into sites of knowledge, resistance, and cultural production.

Through the works of thinkers and writers such as Suraj Yengde, Meena Kandasamy, Yashica Dutt, Manoranjan Byapari, and others, this consciousness interrogates deeply entrenched hierarchies while simultaneously envisioning emancipatory futures. It challenges mainstream aesthetics, rewrites neglected histories, foregrounds intersectional struggles, and exposes the psychological and structural mechanisms of caste-based oppression. Most importantly, it articulates a shift from victimhood to agency—a reclaiming of dignity, identity, and power.

As both a literary and socio-political movement, Neo-Dalit Consciousness compels contemporary India to confront the ongoing realities of caste and recognize the intellectual and creative authority of Dalit voices. It signals not only a resurgence of self but also a reimagining of the nation's moral, cultural, and political landscape. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for a more just, inclusive, and egalitarian future where the Dalit voice is not peripheral but central to the fabric of Indian democracy and modernity.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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